



Issue Focus: Spotlight on Senior Citizens

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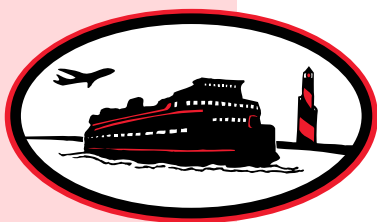
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Joe's committees:

- Education
- Judiciary
- State Government
- School Construction Task Force



Dear Friends,

Senior citizens and retirees are a vital part of our community. In fact, our 34th Legislative District has one of the highest percentages of senior citizens in Washington State. This newsletter focuses on state issues that are of special concern to seniors.

In a very real sense, of course, all state issues are senior issues. Solving problems such as traffic congestion, crime and unemployment affects everyone's quality of life, regardless of age.

But some problems and opportunities do grow in importance with age. The impact of rising prescription-drug prices is a good example. Similarly, steps taken by state leaders to improve the availability and security of long-term care generally have a greater impact on seniors and their loved ones than on younger families.

Since representing local senior citizens is an important part of my job, I'm devoting this entire newsletter to information that is tailored to our district's senior residents.

I hope you find this newsletter helpful. Please let me know if you have any ideas about senior issues – or *any* issues – you care about. You can always reach me quickly through the phone numbers and addresses on this page. I value your input, so please keep in touch.

Sincerely,

Joe McDermott
State Representative – 34th District

Affordable prescriptions

Soaring prescription-drug prices are hurting many family budgets, but senior citizens have been the hardest hit by far. There are too many heart-wrenching stories about seniors coping with skyrocketing prices for needed medicines by eating fewer meals, cutting pills in half or making the long drive to Canada to buy the same drugs at lower prices. And the problem is growing.



A typical senior in our area fills about 18 prescriptions each year at an average cost of \$1,200 – which is more than *double* the costs

experienced as recently as 1992. Yet prescription-drug prices continue to rise five times faster than overall inflation. Worse, over 66,000 seniors in our state lack any prescription-drug coverage to help.

I sponsored state legislation this year asking for federal permission to provide a prescription-drug benefit to Medicare recipients in Washington.

Unfortunately, this proposal was not enacted. Congressional efforts to create a prescription-drug benefit under Medicare have also stalled.

When the Legislature meets in January, I will support a state petition to Congress urging immediate action on a Medicare prescription-drug benefit. I will also urge immediate state action on a new idea for using the state's enormous purchasing power to help seniors and persons with disabilities get discount prices on prescription drugs. Here are the major features of the plan:

1. Create a Washington State drug-purchasing cooperative

The purchasing power of all state agencies that buy prescription drugs would be coordinated and maximized in order to leverage price discounts from manufacturers of prescription drugs.

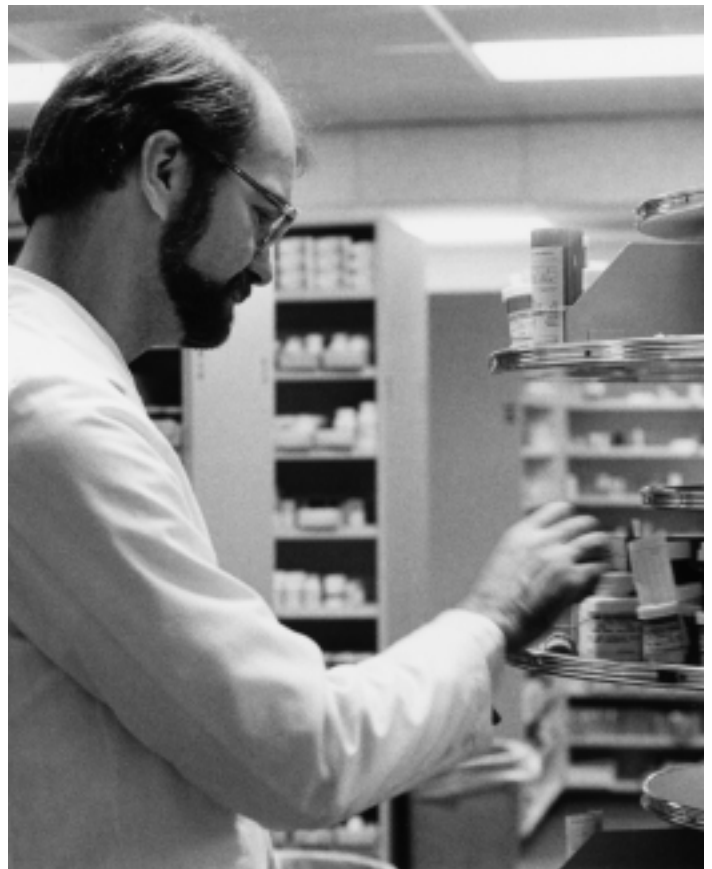
2. Make prescription-drug price discounts available to senior citizens.

A voluntary cooperative, with an affordable annual fee, would allow senior citizens and possibly others to share the benefits of state-negotiated discounts on drug prices.

3. Create a partnership for prescription education

A public-private partnership involving state agencies, physicians, pharmacists, hospitals and others would launch an education campaign to help all prescribers and prescription-drug buyers make smart decisions about the effectiveness and costs of comparable drugs.

This plan is gathering support in our Legislature, and could pass early next year. Let me emphasize that this state plan is **not** an adequate substitute for the federal prescription-drug benefit that Medicare recipients deserve. But enacting this plan would make prices more affordable for thousands of senior citizens and others who need all the help they can get.



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Improving long-term care

Long-term care should offer as much personal independence, dignity and choice as an individual's needs safely allow. Indeed, we've made great strides toward creating home and community care alternatives to institutional care.

But our progress toward smaller long-term care settings that are tailored to individual needs also creates a responsibility to ensure safe, high quality care from a much larger number of care providers. Earlier this year, the Legislature took several steps to improve the safety and quality of long term care.

Care worker wage increase

The vast majority of care workers are good people doing challenging jobs. But low wages are causing a high turnover among caregivers, which means we are losing some of the best people to other professions. This year, the Legislature enacted a 50 cent-per-hour increase in long-term care worker wages. More will need to be done, but this is a good start toward addressing a serious problem.

Whistle-blower protection

We clearly need the ability to identify long-term care employees who should not be caring for vulnerable adults. Unfortunately, employers have often failed to blow the whistle on problem employees because of liability concerns.

This will no longer be an excuse. New whistle-blower protections grant civil and criminal immu-

nity to any long-term care employer who in good faith discloses information about the diligence, skill, reliability or risks of former or current employees. I believe these whistle-blower protections will prove to be an important safeguard for patient safety.

Higher standards for providers

Roughly 11,000 people in Washington receive long-term care in adult family homes. Believe it or not, until this year state regulators had no legal authority to deny an adult family home license based on the applicant's lack of ability or experience in providing care to vulnerable adults. That changed on September 1, when higher standards we enacted took effect. As of now, provider licensing requirements include:

- A high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate;
- At least 320 hours of successful direct caregiving experience;
- Assurances that someone on staff is able to communicate effectively with residents in English.

In addition, beginning next January training must include a food safety component that meets standards set by the State Board of Health.

More inspections to protect residents

Many seniors, disabled persons and their families objected to the lack of mandatory follow-up inspections when serious violations are found in adult family homes or boarding homes. We remedied this problem by legally requiring DSHS to conduct follow-up inspections within 15 days to ensure problems have been corrected.

Fewer evictions, more patient choice

To prevent forced evictions of adult family home residents when a provider's license is suspended, we created a process that allows temporary managers to operate the facility – but the new law also gives affected residents the option to move out of a facility under temporary management without advance notice and without incurring charges.



Breaking ground for the new Vashon-Maury Island Community Care Center inspired joyful celebration. Congratulations for a great all-volunteer effort!
(Photo courtesy Hamish Todd).

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One-stop help:

1-888-4ELDERS

Senior citizens in King County now have a valuable new resource – a one-stop toll-free phone number that will get seniors to a wide variety of useful information:

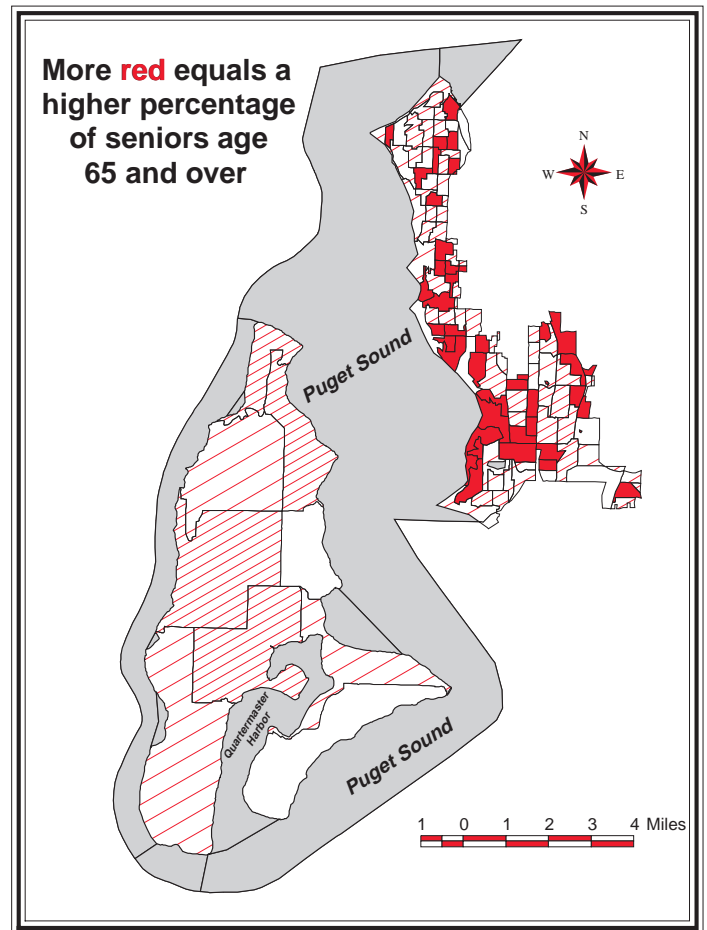
1-888-4ELDERS

(1-888-435-3377)

For emergencies, of course, you should still dial 911. But for other phone questions, try 1-888-4ELDERS first. With this one number you can get *confidential* advice on a wide variety of topics such as:

- How to get help in dealing with government agencies, Social Security and Medicare
- Where to go for health care, dental care or immunizations.
- How to find services like meal delivery or shopping assistance.
- What the best options are for housing or assisted living.
- How to get around Puget Sound on public transportation

When I called 1-888-4ELDERS, I got prompt, friendly answers. This is one phone number every King County senior citizen should keep handy.



Senior citizens are a vital part of our 34th District communities.

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